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## ART INSTRUCTION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: AN ANSWER TO MR. CLARK'S PAPER ♣ ♣ BY DOUGLAS VOLK



N answering the reply by Mr. John S. Clark to my monograph on "Art Instruction in the Public Schools," I shall be obliged to restate, in a measure, my position in regard to this subject, what I have already written being, without doubt, unfamiliar to the readers of "Modern Art." Unfortunately, Mr. Clark has quoted none of the arguments to which he takes exception; nevertheless, all interested in this subject will read with pleasure the clear and able statement which

he makes in support of his position.

It is gratifying to note the high plane of usefulness upon which art education for the masses is placed by Mr. Clark in the beginning of his paper. But once its exalted mission is admitted, it is only right to expect that methods consistent with the carrying out of its purposes shall be accepted, and here it is that most advocates of prevailing art systems part company with artists who take a radically different ground as to what constitutes true artistic aims and methods. After emphasizing the great importance and value of art instruction, Mr. Clark presents such an array of ill-favored conditions and limitations surrounding the study as to practically make the course inoperative. Why, one asks, if the matter is of such far-reaching importance, are not greater efforts made to make the conditions conform to the dignity of the study instead of dwarfing the methods to the level of unfavorable conditions? Far from having a lack of knowledge of what these limitations are, I think artists are more conscious of their benumbing effect than is the average educator. I will go so far as to name two present conditions that make the intelligent study of drawing in the public schools absolutely and unqualifiedly impossible.

### I. The lack of time given to the study.

Consider, for a moment, that a pupil devotes on an average but one week of practice to drawing during the whole school year, and realize how unjust it is to expect anything in the way of technical results in that limited time. It matters not that the time given to the subject (about one hour a week) is spread over the year. It may be answered that not much more time is given to other branches of work, but other cases that might be cited are not parallel, for the reason that a child's mind is, of course, developing constantly during this period, and a pupil would, for instance, be able to read far better at the end of the year after having devoted an hour each week to its practice than he would if he had devoted seven consecutive days to the study. The case would be the same with many other studies, but it is not so with drawing. It is an incontrovertible fact that in this short period no technical results at all commensurate with the efforts made to produce them, can be obtained. As I have said, "Nothing is so absolutely the result of practice alone as good drawing. All the teaching in the world cannot replace it; all that we can hope to do is to teach the pupil how to practice in the right way and awaken his art instincts, by making his work a pleasure and not a task."

II. The lack of a knowledge of drawing on the part of "grade" teachers who give instruction in the art, renders the study utterly futile.

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The truth of this statement seems too obvious to need any argument in its support, and yet the attempt to teach drawing by proxy, through the medium of a "supervisor," is practically the key-stone of the whole prevailing system. Savonarola says, "He knows that which he does." A musician who had no understanding of anatomy would not attempt to teach it, no matter how much knowledge of the science of pedagogy he might happen to possess. Of all things that require to be taught with a full practical knowledge on the part of the instructor, drawing, modeling, etc., are among the most difficult. The fact that primary drawing is in question does not alter the case in the least. The first steps are the all-important ones, it requires just as much ability to guide the beginner intelligently as it does the advanced pupil. It is often stated that the artist thinks only of methods suited to artistic development on a high plane, ignoring other considerations. Whether this is true or not, it must, nevertheless, be admitted that if we are going to deal with art at all, it must be genuine art and nothing else.

The main trouble is, the educator does not as a rule possess a clear understanding of what the aims of art instruction should be. As I understand it, he accepts conclusions drawn by experts, his province being to devise methods of imparting them to children in the best manner possible. Educators do not make geography, but show how it should be taught; they do not say what shall be the aim of scientific research or attempt to lay down deductions, but leave these matters to the devotees of science to determine. But strange enough we find that a system of art instruction has been formulated, not by artists but by well-meaning though ill-advised theorists. Artists naturally insist that the aim of art study shall be in the right direction, and the methods truly artistic. I imagine I can speak for most artists when I affirm that the mechanical systems now in vogue have nothing to do with art development whatever. Mr. Clark passes rather lightly over the indorsement given by distinguished artists to criticisms made in my pamphlet on prevailing methods. Possibly greater good might result if educators would give more heed to what artists have to say on art study. Methods which are wrong, and in themselves inartistic, are not less wrong where the education of children is concerned, nor are meaningless theories justified by public school limitations. Frankly, I am not so much concerned by what "must" be under present conditions as by what ought to be under better ones. Anything worth doing at all is worth going at in the right way. We must not always be confronted by the stone wall of limitations.

Mr. Clark sums up rather briefly the way in which I suggest instruction should be given, as follows: (a) individually, not in classes, (b) by special art instructors, (c) in special art rooms or studios.

Though he does not see that this course would be practicable, he nevertheless admits that it would be desirable to have specially arranged art rooms and to have all art instruction strictly individual. We so nearly agree, then, as to the desirability of these ends that I should like to see Mr. Clark lend his valuable influence and executive ability toward making conditions favorable to the carrying out of a broader artistic policy. He and others associated with him have done much towards stimulating public interest in public school art education, and I am sure they stand ready to assist in introducing more

artistic methods, if an understanding can be arrived at as to how it should be accomplished.

With regard to the introduction of studio methods in the school room, I should say that if they are right they should be introduced just as far as possible, as laboratory methods are employed to facilitate the study of chemistry, for example. In speaking of individual instruction I do not ignore the fact that it must, of necessity, be given in classes, but an intelligent teacher can give directions in such a way that every pupil can develop a motive or produce a drawing from his own standpoint. Any other kind of teaching is not, in any sense, true art instruction.

To restate my views on this point,

"The object of art education in the school should be to develop in the pupil a sense of unity or harmony, and to cultivate within him a regard and love for beauty. It should also seek to keep alive and stimulate in the child the power of imagination and the creative faculties, and, through them, allow full expression to his individuality."

Concerning the co-relation between art and other studies I will say that however valuable the idea may be in other directions, I do not admit that it should, in any way, weaken true art influence. Art must be maintained on its own plane to be of any value. The influence of art, pure and simple, is of the greatest value in forming a child's mind and character. I think it is an Italian saying that "Bad taste leads to crime." Genuine good taste, therefore, must conduce to virtue. I contend that what a child would gain by receiving so-called art training that would enable him to make a constructive drawing in his manual work would not, by any means, compensate him for what he would lose in being deprived of the right kind of art influence, though that influence looked to no other result than the creation of something beautiful and harmonious. My objection, therefore, to mechanical methods and the use of geometrical types of form is based upon something besides my "unfamiliarity with pedagogical considerations." Let mechanical drawing rest on its own basis and be taught with a specific purpose, there will then result no confusion.

Mr. Clark says that "Drill exercise in this exact provable kind of work is as necessary in elementary art instruction as a drill in scales and five-finger exercises is in musical instruction." Exactly because it is considered provable and capable of being done with an instrument does it preclude any individual or sympathetic observance of form.

The artist does not look upon this illustration as parallel. Art is interpretative. The aim of the artist in painting a picture is not to reproduce exactly what is before him—that would result in nothing more than a photograph—but to represent nature according to his own individual taste and imagination. On the other hand the object of one practicing the scales is to produce exact mechanical accuracy in striking the notes in proper sequence. Creative art is to be compared more to musical composition.

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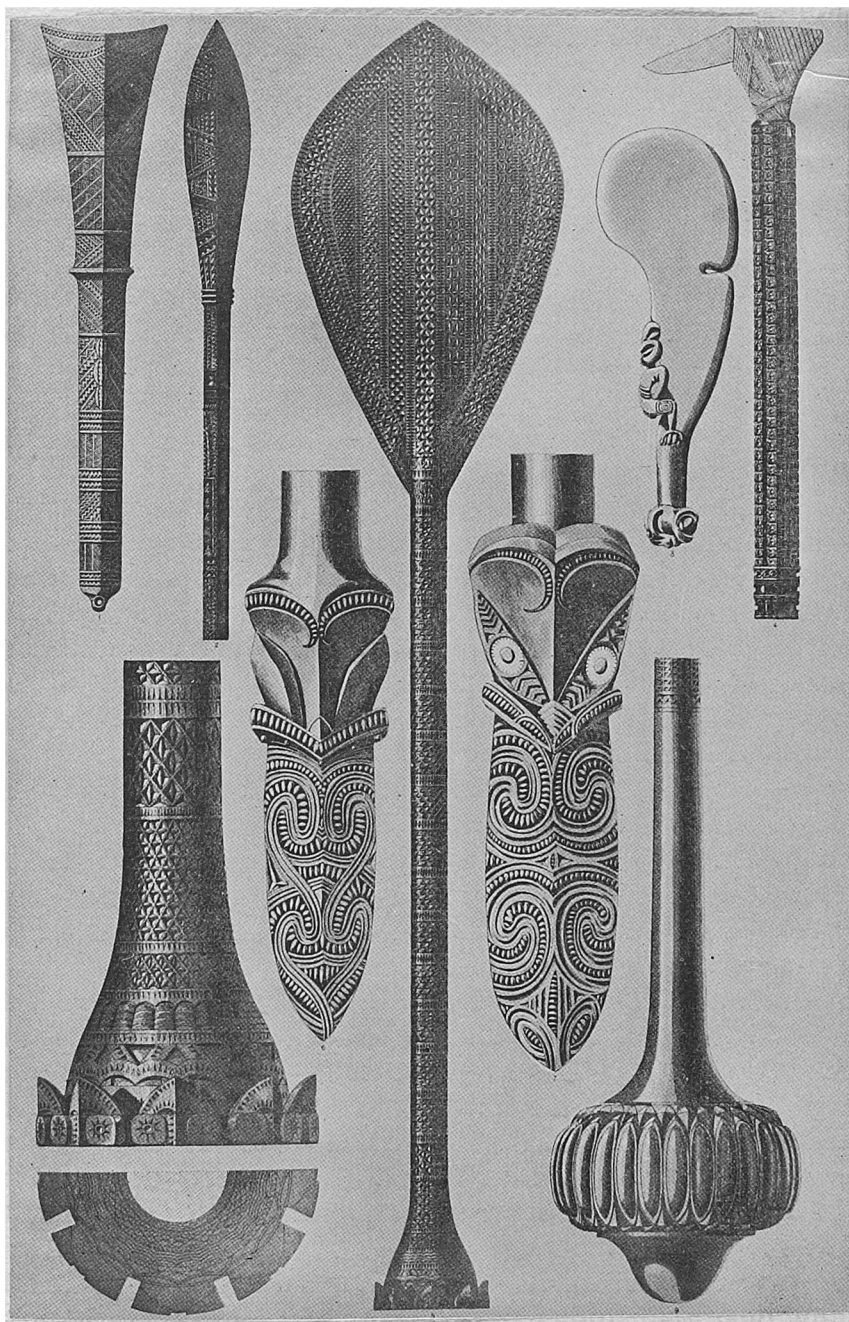
It is only too obvious that the public school plan of art instruction is based exactly upon this "proveable" plan, not because it is considered the best or most artistic method, but because it is more comprehensible to the teacher.

I have emphasized my position in regard to the uselessness of geometrical forms in elementary art study by pointing to examples of aboriginal decoration. Mr. Clark does not think me serious in recommending the use of such examples in an art course, though I beg to assure him I am. What I said on this point is as follows:

"Why not, then, let the child follow in steps more or less parallel to the development of art? I believe this to be one way out of the difficulty. I would, during the child's first years, let him draw and model from fancy and from examples of savage art, in the primitive way natural to him, teaching him to apply design to various objects; at the same time allow him to work from the rude Indian implements, and show and explain to him their attempts at design and decoration. Then, as the pupil grows older, let him be introduced to forms of an order of art somewhat higher, that of the Aztecs, for instance, drawing and modeling objects which they used, such as implements of war, of the hunt, musical instruments, etc. These forms, including utensils of various kinds, are intensely interesting, many of them very simple in design and extremely beautiful. Every article is replete with character and individuality; no better models could be found to draw and model from in the earlier stages or to serve as suggestive guides in his art work, and precisely because of this individual stamp, so marked in each, they are symmetrical, without being mechanically regular."

I was much gratified recently to note the following remarks by Owen Jones, a writer on decorative art of great ability and reputation. What he writes regarding aboriginal art is so directly in accord with my views that I would bring to my aid a quotation from his work. He says, "If we would return to a more healthy condition (in art) we must even be as little children or as savages, and must get rid of the acquired and artificial, and return to and develop natural methods." He states further, "Ornamentation in a savage is a natural instinct" (is it not then in a child?), and gives some illustrations from savage design (which are here reproduced) that clearly bear out the truth of his statement. He says, speaking of the New Zealand paddle, that "it rivals in beauty of design works of the highest civilization." What stronger proof does anyone want than these examples of savage art to demonstrate that art is not based on any mechanical or geometrical foundation? For certainly these savages received no training at all in this direction. If, by any possible chance, one of these aboriginal artists had been put through the art-destroying process now in vogue, he could never have produced any such beautiful results as are here shown.

We know, of course, that any fine design that is an expression of order and harmony has what is called a geometrical basis, but these geometrical forms are conceptual types or facts. We are forced to express our ideas of harmony through forms whose related proportions are called geometrical. Tell a child old enough to comprehend, to draw an apple, and he will make a circle, never a straight line. The "type" is already in his mind. It is not going to make it any clearer to him that the apple is more or less round by showing him a billiard



ORNAMENT OF SAVAGE TRIBES

No. 1 is an Owhyhee club, No. 2 a Sandwich Island club, No. 3 a New Zealand patoo-patoo (whatever that is!), No. 4 an adze from Tahiti, No. 5 a New Zealand paddle, No. 6 a New Zealand war club, No. 7 a South Sea Island war club, No. 8 a paddle handle (larger size of Figure 5), No. 9 a Feejee Island club.



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ball, and the perniciousness of this endeavor to connect the natural form with its type lies directly here, that instead of showing the child wherein the apple conforms to the type he ought rather to be shown or left alone to discover wherein it differs from it.

Thus the forcing upon a child's observation of machine-made type forms tends absolutely to destroy his mental power of observation and his artistic sensitiveness.

Because it is difficult to get well-qualified drawing teachers, no reason whatever is furnished for making the study mechanical and superficial. Public school teachers are already so crowded with various kinds of work that it is unjust to expect them to attempt to teach drawing when they have no knowledge of it. I do not see how anyone claiming to be versed in the science of pedagogy can take a different view of this vital point. It would be just as sane to hold that one who cannot write might, if under the direction of a supervisor of writing, give instruction to others.

As I have pointed out before, there should be a well appointed room with harmoniously tinted walls, etc., for the art work, and a well qualified teacher. Where this is not possible it is very much to be regretted. But the right aim, nevertheless, should be kept in sight. Nothing would be easier than to map out some rigorous system of procedure in the art room, but it must be borne in mind that the very nature of art precludes this tethering process. An unqualified teacher can not get results from any system. The fact must not be lost sight of that the very aim of art is the individual expression of harmony and beauty. How then can we build up a system that does not recognize this as its end, and how is it possible to lay down rules that are to be followed alike by pupils all over the country? An aim and a direction should be given to the work and a plan developed which will consistently lead to a desirable result, but to say how a pupil is to draw today, next week, and next year is abhorrent to the artistic sense.

I have recommended the use of aboriginal forms in teaching and interesting children in art, and I must express a little surprise at Mr. Clark's statement that young children would take more interest in Greek forms than in more savage ones. I am very sure the contrary is the case, as I have witnessed the interest which the pupils of the Ethical Culture School of New York manifested in these very Indian objects.

It is difficult within the limits of this article to do more than suggest a few desirable things to be accomplished in the art room. The point I desire to make here principally is, that not even elementary drawing can be taught at all by mechanical means or by teachers who cannot themselves draw well. Once a true and healthful aim is established, it is for the practical educator to lend his counsel as to the best methods of carrying it out.

As a member of the executive committee of this school (which has to deal practically with the same problems that confront the public school) I have had an opportunity to observe the very promising results of the art work which is being developed along the lines suggested in my monograph recently issued by the school board.

It is an accepted fact, I presume, that a child should be led to do that which he can appreciate. With this thought in mind I have suggested the use of the more rude forms of aboriginal art. Let the teacher show and explain to the younger ones some of these examples, not with the idea that they must be copied, but to encourage him to express himself in a simple, original, though it be a childish manner. Art itself being nothing but expression, a child should never be led to express what is beyond his own experience or capability. Only by encouraging this natural expression can we hope to get anything genuine ultimately. If educators, keeping this in mind, would not look so much for precise results which are only on the surface and produced by coaching, and in no sense expressions of the child's state of mind or feeling, some genuine educational work might be done.

There are the creative and appreciative art faculties. Many teachers are possessed of the latter, few of the former. To encourage the greater appreciation of art, to instill in the pupil a desire to see and make his surroundings more beautiful, appropriate, and harmonious, to give him an understanding of the practical value of art and its essential relation to all departments of social activity, should be the chief aim of public school art instruction. Here is a direction that could be consistently given to the study and intelligently followed by teachers possessing general culture. Teachers and pupils should work together and at simple things, always with the idea of what the child is going to develop in his mind and not alone with the view of getting him to produce a superficial result on paper. Give the child something to do that he can appreciate. Suggestions of what is comprehensible to him can be had from the countless objects of art which illustrate man's progress in its development from the aboriginal forms up to higher standards. Surround the children, throughout the school if possible, at any rate in the art room, only with objects which are beautiful or interesting. Photographs of the world's greatest art productions, handsome casts, of examples of all forms of art, handsome fabric patterns, especially fine examples of industrial art, as well as various beautiful but simple forms of Japanese art, all of which can be had at a comparatively slight cost.

It is most desirable to encourage the child's imagination, one of its most precious possessions, to give full expression to itself, to keep it limber for future use. So let him draw fancifully if he will, or illustrate fairy and other tales which he hears from his teacher or at home, as well as incidents of his school, home, and playground life. But this end cannot be attained through the mechanical, geometrical methods that prevail. Only a thoroughly competent teacher can give any practical instruction in drawing. Such a one should only give the pupils beautiful or interesting forms to draw from, and she will know what examples are suited to her class. She will of course see that her pupils



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work as much as possible from nature, that their ideas and inspirations may be drawn direct from the great fountain head.

But the main thing to accomplish is to get the children engaged in actually doing something in the way of beautifying any simple thing that it is practicable to attempt. Teach them to do well what they undertake, no matter how slight the problem. Let the love of well-doing surpass any pride in the accomplishment. The plan I have suggested would, it seems to me, best fit the child for any future occupation. Industrial art establishments want originality in their artizans, there is an increasing demand for it. Technical excellence is taken for granted, nothing can be created without it, but the public school cannot under the admitted limitations give technical art training of any value, not even in the way of preparation. This must be left to special schools. There are few art instructors who would not prefer, as I most decidedly should, to take a lad under instruction who had received no drawing lessons whatever, such as are given now in the public school. But the child should be under some genuine art influence, if possible, during the formative period, for it is of the greatest importance. Even they who take only a "practical" view of the question must see that art touches life at every point. The value of all raw material is enhanced manifold when it comes under the touch of art. A small lump of gold in the skilled hands of a Benvenuto Cellini is transformed into an object of princely value. Is it the miner or Cellini who contributed most to the wealth of Italy? Our own nation would surely be the richer if there were still finer evidences of artistic taste about us than we see. The great secret of the power and wealth of France lies in the excellence of her art manufactures. Art is expression—a beautifully decorated paddle from the hands of a savage may not argue a high state of morals or intellect on his part, but it does show that he not only loves to use the implement he has so fondly ornamented, but is also an expert in its employment. Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, used to delight in surrounding himself with representations of the lion hunts, in which royal sport he so often engaged.

Art is, in a broad way, an expression of a nation's aspirations and achievements. So may it soon come to us that our better aspirations and instincts will impress themselves into a finer style of architecture, sculpture, and painting, as well as into every branch and phase of industrial art. Make the children factors in this better state of things to be, and in their public school work be less concerned over their ability to draw indifferently and mechanically a few geometrical or other forms, but leave the technicalities to experts only who understand them. In dealing with these impressionable children, let our attention be given to another aspect of the question, one that is far-reaching in its results—the development within the child of a love for harmony and a desire to create it.